DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 233 841 RC 014 270

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TITLE Rural Teachers and Community Schools in Alaska.
INSTITUTION Alaska Univ., Fairbanks. Inst. of Social and Economic Research.
SPONS AGENCY Alaska State Dept. of Education, Juneau.; National Inst. of Education (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE Jun 83
GRANT NIE-G-80-0147
NOTE 17p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Activities; Administrators; Community Schools; *Educational Environment; Elementary Secondary Education; Expectation; *Governance; Rural Education; *Rural Schools; Teacher Administrator Relationship; *Teacher Attitudes; *Teacher Characteristics
IDENTIFIERS *Alaska; *Teacher Community Relationship

ABSTRACT

Over 300 randomly selected teachers in rural Alaskan schools responded to a mail survey including questions regarding their background, community relationships, school social climate, roles in school governance, and evaluations of school conditions. Their average age was 33. Over half were women and 91% were Caucasian, markedly contrasting the communities they served. They averaged 7 years' teaching experience, mostly outside Alaska in non-rural areas. They averaged 30 hours/week in classroom instruction, 10 hours in planning, 4 in staff supervision, and 1 in parent meetings. Teacher-parent social contact was much more frequent. The teachers, 50% of whom had close community ties, participated in church, sports, arts, crafts, hunting, and social activities. Still, over half left Alaska in summer. Teachers expected their students to perform well, complete high school, but not continue to college, although they felt positive about their school's potential to provide excellent education. Teachers noted their active role in selecting textbooks and proposing new courses, but felt that supervisors and principals had greater influence. Eighty percent felt they were successful and felt satisfied with many aspects of their work. Many, however, expressed dissatisfaction with district operations and with the effectiveness of school administrators. (SB)

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RURAL TEACHERS AND COMMUNITY SCHOOLS IN ALASKA

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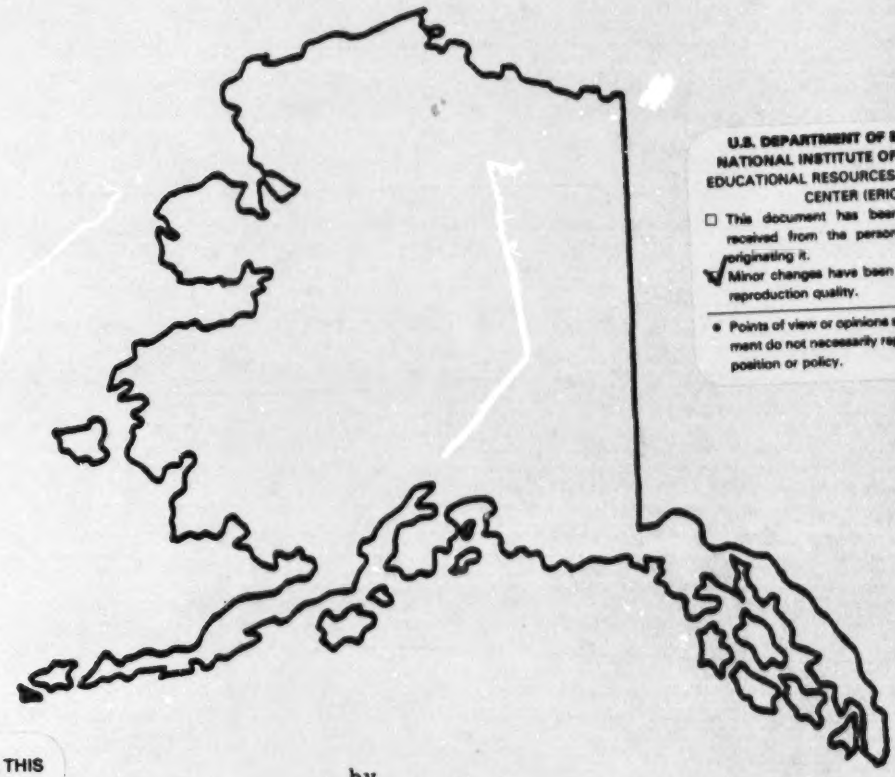

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June 1983

RC017210

Rural Teachers and Community Schools in Alaska

In spring 1982 we asked a random sample of rural Alaska teachers to describe local school operations from their perspective. The purpose was to collect information about local schooling, as part of a three-year study of "Decentralized Education in Rural Alaska," funded by the National Institute of Education.

We sampled randomly one teacher from each rural school, and sent teachers a survey by mail with questions on a wide range of topics. Nearly 97 percent of teachers in the sample answered our questions, and many did so in considerable detail. We report on five topics covered in the survey: the background of rural teachers, teacher-community relationships, school social climate, teachers' roles in school governance, and teachers' evaluations of rural school conditions.

A Descriptive Profile of Rural Teachers

In personal characteristics, Alaska's rural teachers resemble teachers elsewhere in the U.S. They are much different from most rural Alaska residents. In allocation of time, Alaska's rural teachers also appear to resemble urban school teachers in Alaska and the contiguous-48 states.

Background Characteristics. Teachers we sampled are from 23 to 63 years of age, and the average teacher is 33 years old. An overwhelming majority--91 percent--are Caucasians; 3 percent are Alaska Natives, like the majority of the rural population. Slightly more women (55 percent) than men teach in rural schools.

Few rural educators have taught more than 20 years. Most are still relatively new to teaching, and the average number of years' experience is seven. A small minority have spent much time at the school where they currently teach: 55 percent had taught there less than two years, and only 15 percent had taught at the same school for more than seven years.

Few respondents reported they had held jobs in education other than classroom teaching. Of these, the largest number worked as teachers' aides, or in administration, coordination and counselling. Most had some experience in fields other than education, in managerial and clerical or sales capacities.

Rural Alaska teachers are newcomers to Alaska and to rural regions in comparison to most residents. Four percent (13) were born in the state, and only 5 percent (16) took their baccalaureate degrees in Alaska. The largest number graduated from Pacific coast, inter-montane, and northern states--

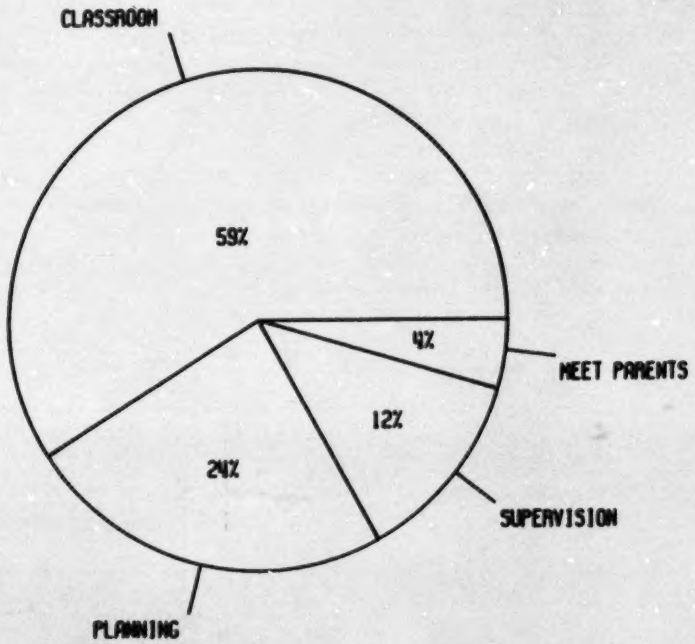
Oregon, Washington, California, Colorado, Maine, and Minnesota. In extent of education and in degree field, rural Alaska teachers are not greatly different from other U.S. teachers.

Teachers have lived in rural Alaska an average of three years. However, a majority (57 percent) have worked in non-Anglo cultures, including Native American communities outside Alaska, minority Black and Hispanic communities. Thus, many new teachers have training relevant to their rural Alaska experience.

Allocation of Time. We asked rural teachers how they divided their time among various tasks. Generally, self-reports are not the best way to measure job activity. But we had the chance to observe teachers in 29 communities in 1982. These observations tended to confirm what teachers had to say.

Classroom instruction was the area of greatest activity, with the average teacher spending approximately 30 hours in class during the typical week. Planning for classes, record keeping, and similar tasks absorbed approximately 10 hours of the average teacher's time. Supervising teachers' aides and classified staff was less time consuming, taking four hours of the typical week. Meeting parents to discuss students' progress took an hour a week on the average. Other activities--administrative duties, counselling, program development, maintenance concerns, meetings with boards and committees--were mentioned by less than 10 percent of the respondents (see Figure 1). School size and teacher tenure seemed to have little impact on how rural teachers allocated their time. But position of respondent did make a difference. Thirty-five of the members of the sample were from one-teacher schools, and they had administrative duties as principal-teachers.

Figure 1. TIME USE IN RURAL ALASKAN SCHOOLS (N=297)



Teachers' Community Relationships

In most rural Alaska communities, teachers are an ethnic minority. Whether they adapt to the community is thus a matter of local and statewide concern, and it influences public policy deliberations on education. Two sets of questions on the survey provided information on the linkages between teachers and communities: direct contacts with parents related to the school, and teachers' community activities. In general, the data present two pictures of teacher-community relationships. About half of the teachers are tightly connected to parents and community; the other half are loosely connected to (and in some cases estranged from) the community.

Three-fourths of the teachers in the sample reported they knew all the parents of their students, while a very small number (3 percent) reported they knew only "a few." New teachers and those in large schools were far less likely to know all or most parents than were veteran and small school teachers. (We defined "new" teachers as those who have taught one year or less in the community. One-third of the respondents fit this definition in the 1982 survey.)

Nearly two-thirds of the teachers said they were invited to parents' homes on at least a monthly basis (only 20 percent were invited once a year or less) and that they in turn invited parents into their own homes at the same rate of frequency. Nearly three-fourths of the teachers indicated that they would feel welcome in the homes of parents or community members. (As was expected, teachers in larger communities were less likely to engage in this socializing than small village teachers.) These are indications of frequent parent-teacher contacts, and of some community acceptance of teachers--which one would expect in the small communities that typify rural Alaska school sites.

Teachers had somewhat fewer contacts with parents directly related to student progress in school. They reported that a majority of parents attended most or all parent-teacher conferences; however, 15 percent said that few parents attended. (Parents whose children attended large rural schools were less likely to attend, in the view of teachers.) And, teachers said that parents were not very likely to visit them, at their initiative, to discuss students' grades, homework, or other problems. A majority indicated that such visits occurred once a year or less. Responses to other questions on the survey suggested that these directed contacts might be sufficient. A slight majority (52 percent), including more elementary than secondary school teachers, do not assign homework, and slightly over one-third (39 percent) reported that special help sessions for students are used once a week or more.

The community school is the premier social organization in many rural Alaska places, and teachers' on-the-job activity puts them in contact with most community adults. Teacher activity is not limited to the school during classroom hours, however. Several indirect measures provided additional information on teacher-community relations. Table 1 reports on the community activities in which teachers participate:

Table 1: Percentage of Teachers Participating "Often" In...

Activity	Percentage
Hunting, fishing, trapping	28 %
Snow machining, skiing, boating, flying airplanes	45
Local arts and crafts	17
Visiting with other teachers	49
Visiting with community members	46
Attending local school board/committee meetings	41
Attending after-school activities	53
Attending other regular community events	33

Responses to additional questions revealed that 48 percent of teachers participated in church groups and 43 percent in sports teams. There were differences in responses based on gender of teacher, size of community, and number of years the teacher had taught in the school.

It is evident that a substantial number of teachers are involved in activities important to rural Alaskans. However, no more than 53 percent engaged in any community activity. Another question on the survey allowed us to test teachers' commitment to the communities in which they live and work. We asked how many summers teachers had spent in the community since they began teaching there. One half (including most of the new teachers) had not lived in the community over the summer.

In general terms, rural teachers have links to parents and community adults arising from school activities and functions. About one-half have strong community roots and are strongly participatory--even in villages with fewer than 100 residents that are ethnically different from the teacher and other school personnel. The other rural teachers are not permanent members of their communities. This is partly explained by the high turnover rate of teachers in rural schools and, as mentioned, teachers are an ethnic minority in most rural places, and opportunities for their community involvement are limited.

School Social Climate

Because of the recent interest in the impact of the social climate of the school on educational achievement, particularly in situations involving minority Americans, we asked teachers a series of questions regarding the climate of expectations in their schools. In general, we found expectations to be moderately high, with some significant exceptions.

A majority of teachers felt that 90 percent or more of their students would graduate from high school, and they thought that parents too held this view. However, a clear majority (58 percent) thought that fewer than one-third of the students would attend college. And a comparable percentage (52 percent)

thought fewer than one-third of the students would attend a two-year degree or vocational training program. Teachers were pessimistic about the ability of students from their schools to complete college or other post-secondary programs: 81 percent thought fewer than one-third would graduate from college, and 63 percent thought fewer than one-third would complete other post-secondary programs. Teachers' views were consistent with their perceptions of parents' expectations on completion of post-secondary work.

A large number of Alaska's rural schools have Native majority populations, where 81 to 100 percent of the students are Alaska Natives. (Three-fourths of the schools with fewer than 50 students have Native majorities.) Teachers in these schools had much lower expectations regarding students' potential college attendance and graduation. For example, 75 percent of teachers in Native majority schools, contrasted to 37 percent of teachers in Caucasian majority schools, expected that less than 10 percent of their students would attend college.

Thus, while rural teachers think completion of high school is a very realistic goal for most rural youth, they think college matriculation and graduation is not a reasonable goal for most students. Nevertheless, teachers held favorable views concerning the academic ability and achievement of students in their schools. Nearly three-fourths thought most students were capable of getting good grades. A majority thought academic ability in their schools was the same or somewhat higher than in other schools in the nation (but 40 percent thought ability was somewhat or much lower). Nearly 60 percent thought student school achievement and learning were average or better than average as compared to other schools in the nation. (New teachers were slightly less favorable in this respect than veteran teachers.) And a whopping 95 percent thought their school could be at least average (and 22 percent thought "among the best") with regard to student school achievement and learning. Teachers of larger schools were more favorable in their evaluations than those of small schools on this point. And teachers of schools with mostly Native students were less favorable.

When asked about student achievement potential in relation to national educational norms, teachers' views were somewhat less positive. A majority (56 percent) expected achievement at or above national norms, but 26 percent thought performance would be slightly below (and 14 percent much below) national norms. We suspect these negative readings were shaped by knowledge of achievement test data. Finally, only 22 percent of the sample of teachers believed that 100 percent of the students in their school would be capable of reading English proficiently by the end of high school. (A majority--51 percent--thought 90 percent or more of the students would graduate from high school with this ability.)

These views of teachers reflect both knowledge of standardized test scores of rural youth and some ambivalence about the educational prospects of rural students and schools. Teachers expect students to do well in high school and to graduate from it; but they do not expect most of their students to continue schooling beyond high school. (Teachers are aware of the resistance to post-secondary in many rural places, for this training often removes village youth from the community.) Teachers do not find their students and

schools greatly different from other students and schools in the U.S. Teachers' views also embody a degree of contradiction: they do not expect students to achieve above national norms (an indication of which is commentary about reading proficiency in English), but they are strongly positive regarding the potential of their school for excellence.

Teachers in the Governance of Alaska's Rural Schools

Teachers are prominent figures in small rural communities, and we would expect them to be highly involved actors in rural schools and sensitive observers of school governance processes. The questions we asked were attempts to assess first the extent to which teachers participated in important school functions, and second the degree of influence teachers had, compared to principals, superintendents, and school boards.

Participation. The important activities in which teachers may be engaged range from hiring personnel, setting the calendar, deciding on textbooks and courses to deciding how the school building will be used and what behavior is appropriate in it. We asked teachers to compare their participation in these functional areas to that of six other actors: principals, students, parents, local boards (advisory school boards or community school committees), district superintendents, and district board members. Table 2 on the following page summarizes the responses of the sample of teachers, comparing their answers to those of principals in a 1981 survey.

There is a moderately high measure of agreement in the responses of teachers and principals. In roughly four of five cases, the percentage evaluations of participation are nearly the same. The general trend of the responses is clear too: teachers participate actively in fewer areas than do principals, superintendents, and district board members. However, in five of the functional areas, a majority of respondents thought teachers played a very active part: developing the school calendar, selecting textbooks, proposing new courses, formally evaluating school programs, and defining acceptable student behavior. And in two of these areas--text selection and proposing courses--respondents thought teachers were more active than any other school actor.

The evaluations of teachers appeared to be shaped by their tenure and setting. For example, new teachers were more inclined than veteran teachers to regard local actors as strong participants. Teachers in small schools (most of which have Native majority populations) were far more likely than teachers in larger schools to see local actors as significant participants in all school government processes. Their views of the activity of parents and local boards were much more favorable.

Teachers thought their own involvement was limited to areas of their expertise. Their opinion was that principals and superintendents were far more active, general agents of school government. This view was reiterated in teachers' comments on influence of actors in school government.

Table 2. -- Participation in Local School Operations, Rural Alaska

Function	Percentage of Rural Teachers*(Principals**) Believing ... Participates						
	Principal	Teachers	Students	Parents	ASB/CSC	Supt.	Dist. Bd.
1. Hiring principals, teachers	44 (49)	7 (9)	2 (2)	14 (16)	33 (41)	91 (95)	66 (71)
2. Hiring other school personnel	68 (85)	15 (12)	1 (2)	15 (10)	48 (49)	59 (58)	41 (42)
3. Developing the school calendar	76 (85)	62 (73)	15 (29)	36 (44)	55 (61)	52 (57)	49 (58)
4. Selecting textbooks	65 (80)	89 (85)	5 (7)	11 (14)	16 (18)	36 (42)	26 (36)
5. Proposing new courses	77 (90)	84 (86)	32 (44)	40 (53)	41 (55)	53 (62)	43 (53)
6. Formally evaluating school programs	76 (87)	55 (55)	16 (22)	23 (29)	32 (43)	68 (81)	41 (49)
7. Planning school budget	73 (80)	34 (47)	4 (9)	13 (19)	41 (49)	78 (84)	60 (63)
8. Defining acceptable student behavior	87 (93)	84 (83)	41 (50)	46 (50)	48 (56)	42 (50)	39 (51)
9. Defining community use of facilities	82 (86)	35 (29)	16 (18)	43 (38)	52 (60)	48 (56)	45 (51)
10. Determining local construction needs	66 (78)	33 (39)	12 (11)	41 (43)	51 (55)	77 (84)	66 (71)
11. Proposing new school facilities	66 (72)	40 (35)	16 (15)	43 (41)	51 (56)	79 (84)	63 (72)

*Drawn from responses to the Teacher Survey, 1982; N=304

**Responses to the Principal Survey, 1981; N=315 Responses from principals are in parentheses.

Influence. Table 3 presents data on eight of the 11 functional areas, and in each indicates views of teachers (and principals) regarding who is the most influential actor.

Table 3: Percentage of Rural Teachers* (Principals**) Regarding ... As Most Influential+

	Function	Principal	Teachers	Local Brd	Supt	Dist. Brd
1.	Hiring principals, teachers++	9 (10)	-- (--)	5 (11)	65 (68)	10 (8)
2.	Hiring other school personnel	46 (56)	1 (1)	16 (18)	26 (21)	4 (3)
3.	Deciding how school budget will be spent	45 (46)	4 (3)	3 (6)	30 (35)	14 (10)
4.	Approving textbooks for the school	26 (43)	41 (27)	2 (5)	12 (11)	11 (11)
5.	Deciding on school calendar	35 (21)	9 (5)	17 (28)	13 (16)	18 (13)
6.	Deciding on new courses/ programs	39 (41)	21 (19)	5 (10)	15 (15)	12 (12)
7.	Deciding on community use of facilities	46 (42)	4 (1)	22 (26)	11 (13)	8 (12)
8.	Deciding on acceptable student behavior	45 (46)	32 (18)	9 (13)	3 (3)	4 (6)

*Drawn from responses to the teacher survey, 1982, N=304

**Responses to the Principal Survey, 1981, N=315. Responses from principals are in parentheses.

+Students, parents/community, and district staff are excluded from the table. In one functional area (influence over hiring principals and teachers) 7 percent of the respondents thought district staff were most influential. In all other functional areas, less than 5 percent of the respondents regarded these other actors as having most influence. Because we have excluded them, row totals do not equal 100 percent.

++Our mistake was to group principals and teachers. Data collected in field research lead us to suspect that in the opinion of principals, they are also the most ifluential participants in the recruitment and retention of teachers, a point on which teachers appeared to be in agreement.

Table 3 presents important data on the pattern of influence in rural schools, from the perspective of school teachers and principals. We would not expect perfect agreement between the evaluations of teachers and principals, and we do not see it in the figures. Nevertheless, in six of the eight functional areas, there is substantial agreement on who is most influential. Principals and teachers agree that superintendents are the chief hiring officer. They also agree that principals are most influential in hiring other school personnel, deciding on how the school budget should be spent, what new courses and programs should be offered, what acceptable student behavior is, and how the school facility should be used by the community.

Disagreements center on textbook selection and the school calendar. Whereas principals see themselves as having most influence over books used in the school, teachers see this as their prerogative. And whereas principals see local boards as being most influential in deciding when the school year starts and ends, teachers see this as a function of the principal.

Our final question in the area of school governance asked teachers who was "most important" in overall influence. Teachers' responses were predictable, given the above information: 49 percent thought principals had greatest influence, followed by 19 percent who voted for district superintendent, 11 percent for district school board, and 9 percent for teachers. These evaluations are consistent with the responses of principals, with one exception. Fifty-three percent of the principals thought they were most significant, followed by district superintendents (17 percent), district school boards (13 percent), and local boards (11 percent). At issue in the comparative evaluation of teachers and principals concerning influence in school governance is only the question of who occupies fourth place--local boards or teachers.

An implicit question of our research on rural schools is whether one's role in the process of school government is related significantly to job satisfaction. Analysis of teachers' participation in school operations and teachers' perceptions of limited influence leads us to ask further questions about the conditions of teaching in rural Alaska.

Teacher Satisfaction with School and Community Conditions

Most teachers are relatively new to the unique cultures and societies of rural Alaska. Nevertheless, they appear to view themselves as established in their communities to the degree possible, given the fact that most of them are Caucasians teaching in Native majority regions. Their expectations regarding students and their schools are moderately optimistic. In a question on their accomplishments as teachers, nearly 80 percent reported that they were "very successful" or "successful." What are teachers happy about and what makes them unhappy? To answer these questions, we asked respondents to indicate their perceptions about general and specific conditions and individuals in their school and community.

With the exception of two areas in which teachers were "very satisfied" (pay and benefits [55 percent], the highest in the nation for school teachers; and student relations [60 percent], which tend to be very amicable in the small classrooms of most rural Alaska schools), no other single response

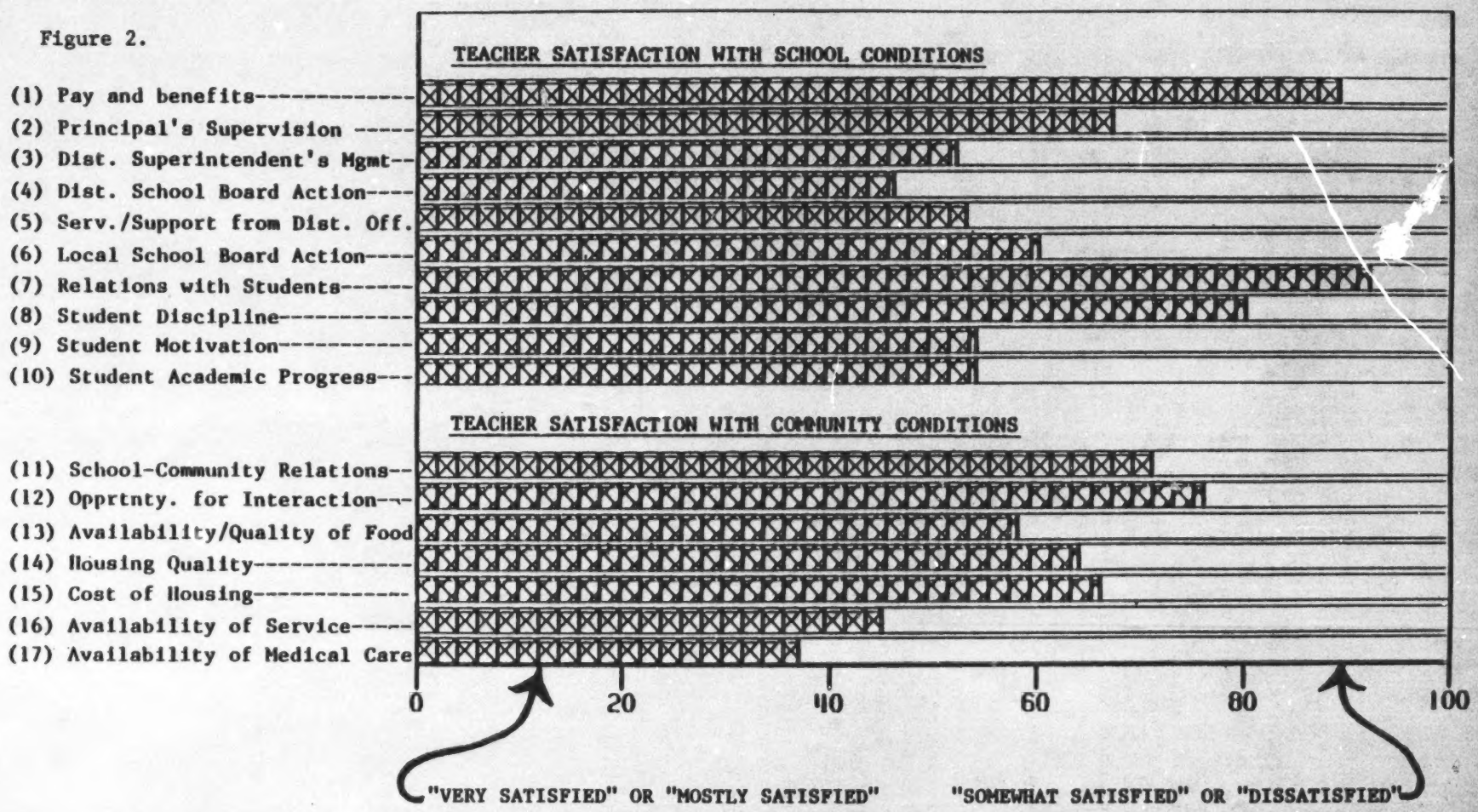
seemed particularly idiosyncratic. However, when we grouped the responses as we have in Figure 2 on the following page, distinguishing the mostly satisfied from the mostly dissatisfied categories, we note a patterning of answers that tells us something about the state of mind of rural teachers.

There are some areas of dissatisfaction one would expect, given the nature of rural Alaska society. Rural Alaska places are quite small in comparison to rural regions of the U.S., and they are more isolated from cities and service areas than any part of the contiguous-48 states. Substantial teacher dissatisfaction with such conditions as poor medical care, inadequate housing and maintenance services, and limited selection of foods are to be expected given the great variance between living conditions in rural areas and urban Alaska (or contiguous-48) conditions. Also, we would expect that teachers will tend to be dissatisfied with the motivation and progress students display in school.

What strikes us as most interesting about teachers' views is the clustering of responses in the area of school organization, management, and governance. There is moderate dissatisfaction with those who are seen to be in control of the community school--the principal and local board. But there is relatively greater dissatisfaction with actions and effects of operations at the district office. Teachers say there are problems in the relationships between local schools and districts, central offices and boards, problems that are particularly serious in the larger REAA and borough districts of the state. (Dissatisfied teachers are more likely to teach in small schools with Native majority populations; veteran teachers are more dissatisfied than new faculty.)

To attempt to understand this dissatisfaction concerning the control of the academic environment in rural schools, we looked closely at the responses teachers made, paying particular attention to comments and to what amounted in several cases to a litany of complaints about local school and district office conditions. Samples of these comments included such points as "The central office fails to understand local problems," and "I was assigned to ------- school by the district office and given nothing to do for six months," and references to nepotism, regional favoritism, rank incompetence, and the like.

Figure 2.


TEACHER SATISFACTION WITH SCHOOL CONDITIONS
(1) Pay and benefits----------
(2) Principal's Supervision -----
(3) Dist. Superintendent's Mgmt--
(4) Dist. School Board Action----
(5) Serv./Support from Dist. Off.
(6) Local School Board Action----
(7) Relations with Students------
(8) Student Discipline----------
(9) Student Motivation----------
(10) Student Academic Progress---
TEACHER SATISFACTION WITH COMMUNITY CONDITIONS
(11) School-Community Relations--
(12) Opprtnty. for Interaction---
(13) Availability/Quality of Food
(14) Housing Quality----------
(15) Cost of Housing----------
(16) Availability of Service-----
(17) Availability of Medical Care
0
20
40
60
80
100
"VERY SATISFIED" OR "MOSTLY SATISFIED"
"SOMEWHAT SATISFIED" OR "DISSATISFIED"

The remarks of teachers suggested that effectiveness of administrative personnel might be the issue, and fortunately, we had asked a question about this point, presented in Table 4 below:

Table 4: Teachers' Perceptions of Effectiveness of School/District Personnel

	Best/Better Than Average	Average	Inferior/Below Average
Teachers	78 %	20 %	2 %
Principals	59	24	17
Local ASB (CSC)	39	38	23
Superintendent	46	31	23
District School Board	29	42	29
District Staff	48	37	15

Teachers are perhaps not the most reliable commentators on their own effectiveness, and we have discounted this self-evaluation. But teachers are in a unique position to observe the effectiveness of school governing boards and administrators. What they say is that in many cases, there are problems. A large minority of the teachers are critical of the competence of district superintendents and local/regional boards. Yet this criticism does not explain our findings completely. In other words, only part of teacher dissatisfaction with school management and control relates to the presumed ineffectiveness of administrators and boards. There is something else.

The survey of Alaska's rural school teachers is largely silent on what might explain these very interesting findings. Field research in 29 different school sites in 1982 suggested that in some rural communities and regions, a pattern of control and influence has evolved that is fundamentally different from what teachers have been trained to expect. We will return to this theme in future reports.

Methodology

We used the 1982 Education Directory to form a list of rural school teachers. Our initial definition of rural comprehended all schools outside of Anchorage, Fairbanks, Juneau, and Ketchikan. The sample was designed to represent teachers in schools, the unit of analysis of our project. We randomly selected one teacher from each rural school. Half of these schools have fewer than 50 students.

We developed a questionnaire on local school operations, including a number of items used in the 1981 principal survey, and we pretested the survey in several sites with over 30 principals, teachers, superintendents, and education researchers. We mailed the survey to principals in February, 1982 and followed this with two waves of mail surveys and telephone calls to non-respondents. Most of the data were collected by May 1982, but a few surveys came in later. The completion rate of 96.5 percent was high, and it insures that comments represent the universe of teachers in schools.

Data were coded (most questions were closed-format type) by a research aide, and a verification routine was used to insure inter-coder reliability. Coding sheets were directly encoded onto tape, which has been analyzed using the SPSS package.

Acknowledgements

Our work would not have been possible without the excellent assistance and cooperation given us by Alaska's rural school teachers. They kindly took their time to complete the surveys; in many cases, they wrote extensive comments that have helped our work greatly. We also thank the principals, district staff, and superintendents who helped us develop the questionnaire and pretest it.

Colleagues in the College of Arts and Sciences and the College of Human and Rural Development helped us at several stages of this project. We particularly thank Ray Barnhardt, Pat Dubbs, Mike Gaffney, Doug Rider, and Tony Strong. Thanks are also due Rosita Worl for her advice and suggestions.

Research aides at the university helped in the collection and analysis of data from the teacher survey. They include: Jo Ann Kuchle, Mike Bradley, Christy Baker, and Joe St. Sauver (who has been principally responsible for data analysis used in this report and graphics). The project secretary, Sheri Layral, was responsible for production of the teacher survey and keeping survey research on schedule. Thanks are due Barbara Sundberg for her typing of this report and other cheerful assistance.

Our research on rural schools has been supported by a grant from the National Institute of Education, in the series "School Management and Organizational Studies," NIE-G-80-0147. Dissemination of the report has been made possible by a grant from the Alaska Department of Education. Project officers in both agencies--Gail MacColl at NIE, Bob Silverman, Al Hazelton, and Ernie Polley at DOE--have been unusually supportive of our work.

The views expressed in the report (along with any unintended errors and omissions) are those of the authors alone.